

The Glory Beyond the Glory

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It's the 13th century BCE, and the Egyptian empire is dominating the entire Middle East. An Egyptian prince named Moses comes to the realization that he is actually adopted, and that his birth mother, maid to the daughter of Pharaoh, belongs to a band of slaves known as the "descendants of Israel." ^{Ex. 1-2} Moses sees that the Israelites are being terribly abused, and he resolves to intervene on their behalf. He secretly kills a particularly brutal slave foreman, but that *really* goes wrong. Not only do the Israelites tell him to butt out when he tries to stop them from fighting each other, but it becomes clear that the word is out about the murder. One of them sneers at him, "What, are you going to kill me like you killed that Egyptian yesterday?" Moses leaves Egypt in a hurry, with an assassination order from Pharaoh hanging over his head. ^{Ex. 2:11-15} He finds refuge way out in the desert of Sinai when he meets and marries a shepherdess and takes up the humble trade of his Israelite ancestors: sheep herding. Four decades later, all the fluff of status as a prince of the Egyptian empire has melted away into the dust. All his former arrogance and self-confidence is a distant memory that only provokes a sad shake of the head. ^{Ex. 2:16-25} And then...

One day he is tending his father-in-law's flock on the side of a mountain called Mount Horeb, and something catches his eye. There's a bush a little ways off that glows like it's on fire, but there is no smoke, no ashes. Wow, says Moses, I am going to go see what that is. But then he hears a voice: "Moses! Moses! Don't go any closer. Take the sandals off your feet. You're standing on holy ground." ^{Ex. 3:1-5} Moses hides his face as God tells him that God is going to rescue the descendants of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. God is going to bring them to live in the land of Canaan, a promise God had made to Abraham, Israel's grandfather, many centuries earlier. "I'm sending *you* to announce this to Pharaoh," says God. Moses says, "Who, *me*?" There is a short argument, which God wins, and then Moses asks the million-dollar question.

When the Israelites ask me what your name is, what should I tell them? ^{Ex. 3:13}

You may be surprised to learn that God's answer to Moses's question is not what you'll read all over your Old Testament. God's name is not "the LORD," which is,

in fact, the name of Baal, the chief god of the Canaanites (Baal means “Lord”). No, the name God gives Moses is very different:

I am the One who Is. ^{Ex. 3:14-15; see also Rev. 1:4, 8}

I will risk making two statements about this name. First, God’s self-naming testifies about God that God really exists, unlike other gods, which are creations of the human imagination. Second, if Moses and the Israelites have any other conceptions about God than that, they should get ready to relearn everything from scratch.

So that is God’s *first name*. God’s *last name*, or, if you like, the *rest* of God’s name, is going to be revealed to Moses a few months later. Excuse me while I fast forward through Moses and his brother Aaron going back to Egypt with the demand “Let my people go,” the escalating series of plagues that God sends on the Egyptians to make them let Israel go, Pharaoh’s stubbornness, the Passover, the plague on the firstborn sons of Egypt, the rush to cross the Red Sea, Pharaoh’s insane about-face and attempt to stop the Israelites, and the drowning of a large part of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. ^{Ex. 3-15}

It’s now two months after the original Passover, and Moses and the Israelites have journeyed through the Arabian desert to the base of Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai). ^{Ex. 19:1-2} This is the very same mountain where Moses saw the burning bush and first heard God’s name. Moses now mediates a covenant—essentially an adoption agreement—between God and the people. The covenant includes a rudimentary civil code and some forms of worship for the fledgling people of God. ^{Ex. 19-24} Then Moses goes up on the mountain alone and spends 40 days in intense communion with God. He receives more worship instructions, as well as the Ten Commandments, “written by the finger of God” on two stone tablets. ^{Ex. 24:12-31:18} But when Moses comes back down the mountain, the people are having a big orgy and worshiping a golden calf idol. I imagine him slowly knocking the stone tablets against his forehead and saying, “Hopeless! You people are hopeless!” Moses completely loses his temper. He throws down the tablets and breaks them. ^{Ex. 32:1-19} After harshly punishing the people for this grave insult to the God who has just saved them from slavery and genocide in Egypt, Moses goes into “the tent of meeting” outside the Israelite camp. That’s his headquarters, where he often talks with God. ^{Ex. 33:7-11} While he’s there, discouraged and humiliated, Moses has an astounding conversation with God. I’ll just quote it straight from the page of Exodus.¹

¹² Moses said to The One Who Is, “You’ve been telling me to lead this people, but you haven’t let me know who you will send with me. And you’ve said, ‘I

¹ This and the following passage (Exod. 34:5-7) are my own translations.

know you by name and you have found acceptance with me.’¹³ So now, I pray, if I have found acceptance with you, make me understand your way. Then I will know you, and I will continue to find acceptance with you—and keep in mind that this nation is your people.”²

¹⁴ The One Who Is replied, “I’m going to go with you, and I’m going to give you rest.”

¹⁵ Then Moses said to him, “Unless you go with us, please don’t send us on from here.”¹⁶ How will anyone know that I have found acceptance with you—I and your people—unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other peoples on the face of the earth?”

¹⁷ And The One Who Is said to Moses, “I’m going to do exactly what you have asked, because you have found acceptance with me and I know you by name.”

¹⁸ Then Moses said, “Please show me your glory!”

¹⁹ And The One Who Is said, “I am going to make all my goodness pass in front of you,³ and I am going to call out my name, The One Who Is, in front of you. And I am going to be merciful to whoever I want to be merciful to, and I am going to be compassionate to whoever I want to be compassionate to.”^{Ex. 33:12-19}

There are three remarkable things about this conversation.

First, Moses wants to know God’s *way*. He has just spent 40 days taking dictation about everything God wants him and the Israelites to do. And yet there is something he feels he doesn’t know. He knows the particular things God wants the people to do, but what is the deepest core of God’s will? When Moses says “make me know your way,”^{v. 13} I think he’s saying, “Help me understand your guiding philosophy. Help me internalize the controlling principle behind the specifics.” The boldness and the daring expectation of that request is amazing to me. I also love how gentle and positive God’s response is. After reassuring Moses that God will indeed go with him and the Israelites, God says, “I’m going to do exactly what you have asked.”^{v. 17}

Second, after everything that Moses has seen and experienced in God’s presence, it’s kind of mind-blowing that he now says “Show me your glory.”^{v. 18} Moses has seen the burning bush,^{Ex. 3} the parting of the Red Sea,^{Ex. 14-15} and the pillar of fire and cloud,^{Ex. 13:21} and he has just spent 40 days up on the mountain in the heart of glory so strong that nobody could go near it except for him.^{Ex. 24:2, 15-18} And yet Moses is yearning for something much deeper. He wants to know the real deal. He

² *People* here is singular, and means nation. Later (v. 15) we’ll have *peoples*, which means nations.

³ Literally, “I am going to cause all my goodness to pass by in front of your face.”

wants to go *all the way in*. Once again, God says yes. “Sure, let’s do it. First thing tomorrow.”^{Ex. 34:2} Amazing.

Third, there is something amazing about the way in which God ties together *glory, goodness, and name*.^{vv. 18-19, 22} God says “I know you by name,”^{v. 17} which seems to be a way of saying, *I know you very well*. Now Moses is going to know God very well. He is going to experience a revelation of all of God’s goodness and he will learn something new about God’s name—something that will tell him what God is really, truly like.

Finally God says something that is a watershed, a blade sharp enough to split an atom.^{Heb. 4:12-13} “I am going to be merciful to whoever I want to be merciful to, and I am going to be compassionate to whoever I want to be compassionate to.”^{v. 19} In heaven and on earth there are two utterly contradictory ways of taking this statement. Which it means to a person cuts to the center of who they are—because who they are will dictate the meaning they project on God when they hear it. Does it mean “I have my chosen ones, my favorites, and only they will ever receive my true mercy and compassion,” or does it mean, “When I determine to be merciful to someone and show them compassion, no one and nothing will stop me”?

Early the next morning after this conversation, Moses hikes back up Mount Horeb (Sinai) to present himself in front of God.^{Ex. 34:1-4} And then...

⁵ The One Who Is came down in a cloud and remained there with Moses,⁴ and Moses called on the name of The One Who Is. ⁶ And The One Who Is passed by in front of Moses and called out,

The One Who Is—

The One Who Is a compassionate and merciful God,

Patient and slow to get angry,

Full of faithful love and trustworthiness—

Holding on to faithful love for thousands,

Forgiving lawlessness and disobedience and sin,

⁷ Yet by no means simply removing consequences—

Causing the effects of the parents’ lawlessness

to encounter their children and grandchildren,

to the third and even fourth generation.

There it is, God’s full name, God’s glory, the name that reveals “all of God’s goodness.”^{Ex. 33:19} This is the Name—and the nature—of the One Who Is, not the one who is imagined to exist by most people, whether they believe or disbelieve. The innermost nature of the One who created the universe is to be full of compassion, mercy, patience, faithful love, and forgiveness. There isn’t anything else lurking

⁴ Lit. “and he remained [took his stand] with him there.” It is not totally clear who is remaining/standing with whom.

underneath—this is the bottom of God’s heart. Love is God’s “way,”^{Ex. 33:13} the controlling principle out of which comes everything that God does. John, writing in the New Testament, has received and passes on the same testimony: “there is no darkness in God at all,”^{1 Jn 1:5} and “God is love.”^{1 Jn 1:5; 4:8, 16}

There is one complication, however.^{v. 7} God does not simply miraculously cause all consequences of harmful behavior to disappear. Human beings are created as moral and social beings, which means that by nature they have the capacity to influence one another by example—whether for good or for evil. Destructive ways of being—addiction, abuse, violence, racism, greed—have a way of cascading from generation to generation in a family. If anyone in this process repents and turns to God, God stands ready with complete forgiveness and mercy and restoration. But others in the process have their own repentance work to do. God will not guarantee to undo the consequences of my actions in the moral lives of others. They have to do their own work—including forgiving me. If they do not, they risk locking themselves into the very pattern they blame me for.

The testimony of Jesus of Nazareth, joined by prophets and apostles and countless people of faith, including me, is that there is One beyond all human understanding, who is the Maker of all things. That One created all things to be beautiful and good, and holds all things in existence. Not only that, but that One is *on hand* to the created ones when we need help. God is there to help. In traditional language, the beginning of the gospel⁵ is that *God is a Helper, a Savior*. The world lies in the arms of a personal Creator who loves the creation—including us human beings—and the Creator is ready and willing and able to help us when we need it.

⁵ “Gospel” is an old English word that means “good news.”

One: Where We Are

We live on a small rocky planet called the earth.
About seven billion (seven thousand million) human beings live here.
Our rocky planet home is mostly made of three elements:
silicon, oxygen, and iron.
The earth gets heavier and hotter as you go from its surface to its core (center).
The core is mostly made of iron,
but there are also some heavier elements such as uranium.
Some of the heavy elements are slowly changing into lighter elements.
That change gives out heat all the time.
For that reason, the earth's core is very hot: five times hotter than the hottest volcano.
The earth's hot core helps a little bit to keep the surface at a steady heat.
The earth orbits (goes around) the sun.
The sun is a hot, bright ball of gas, mostly hydrogen and helium.
It is more than a million times the size of the earth.
To understand this, think of a pumpkin and a pea.
Imagine them being two bus-lengths apart.
The pumpkin would be the sun, and the pea would be the earth.
The sun is made mostly of two very light gases: hydrogen and helium.
Like the core of the earth, the sun's elements are changing all the time.
Unlike the core of the earth, the sun's elements are getting heavier, not lighter.
The sun's outer surface is about as hot as the core of the earth.
But the sun's core gets more than 100 times hotter.
That is why the sun gives off so much heat and light.
The sun's great heat and light go out in all directions.
When they reach the surface of the earth,
they add to the heat coming from the earth's core.
These two kinds of heat, together with the light of the sun,
help make up the earth's environment, its setting for life.
Without these forms of heat and light,
our kind of life would not be able to exist.
Twenty million known kinds of creatures live on this planet.
All of them depend on one another so that they can go on living.
Single creatures need other single creatures,

and species (kinds) also need one another.

Astronomers spend their lives studying the sun and stars.

Astronomers tell us that the sun is one star among many stars.

The stars are many different sizes and ages.

Astronomers teach us that our star, the sun, along with our planet,

Orbits the center of a group of about 100,000,000,000 (100 billion) stars.

We call this group of stars a galaxy.

We can see the nearest stars (other suns) in our galaxy on a clear night.

Like the sun, they are often more than a million times as big as the whole earth.

Yet they are so far away that we see them as points of light in the sky.

We see stars that are more distant in our galaxy as a kind of hazy path across the dark sky.

Cosmologists spend their lives studying the beginning and history of the universe.

They tell us our galaxy is one of about 200,000,000,000 (200 billion) galaxies.

We humans find ourselves here on the living surface of the earth.

About 20 million different kinds of living beings exist on our little planet,

but we are the only kind—that we know of—that

uses fire

tells stories and makes up poems

thinks, “What would happen if. . .”

asks, “What kind of being am I?”

makes writings to remember the past, and studies them

intentionally kills millions of its own species

knowingly brings to an end thousands of other species, without caring.

We have a huge problem on this planet.

As a species, we humans don’t know how to stay alive.

Right now we are killing ourselves off very, very quickly.

It’s worse than that:

we are also killing off hundreds, thousands, of other species.

That means yesterday there was a certain kind of butterfly on the earth,

or a certain kind of frog on the earth,

and today there are no more of them, forever.

Those who study the history of life on earth

say that the whole living system of the earth is sick and dying.

Because of us, the earth’s forests are disappearing.

Because of us, life in the vast oceans is dying.

Because of us, earth’s weather systems are spinning out of control.

Species are dying off faster and faster—

faster now than at any time in the past 100,000,000 (one hundred million) years.

We are caught in the snowballing effects of our greedy habits as a species.

We need help.

We need to learn how to value our life more than greed,
more than things that have nothing to do with life, such as
unlimited power,
unlimited pleasure,
and the dream of “being on top.”